

Issue: Library and Infrastructure Funding

The Code of Iowa (section 8A.321, paragraph one and elsewhere) exempts the Department for the Blind from the purview of building maintenance duties performed by the Department of Administrative Services ("DAS"), which in general holds responsibility for the maintenance and upkeep of buildings at the seat of government. The Code of Iowa reserves this authority for the Commission for the Blind in chapter 216B. Furthermore, a considerable part of the responsibility the Commission holds for the care of the building supports the operation of a library for the blind and physically handicapped. Yet neither section discusses an appropriation in this context.

Further, DAS was created as an agency consisting of "enterprises" and therefore finances its own operations largely based on user decisions and the ensuing billings to other agencies, and less on general fund appropriations from the legislature.

The Department for the Blind, on the other hand, receives a single general fund operating appropriation (in 2007, \$ 2,005,143) which is used principally to match federal formula grant allocations that are appropriated by Congress in order to further the vocational rehabilitation and independent living needs of blind Iowans. However, the building occupied by the Department for the Blind consists of approximately 100,000 square feet on seven floors and houses a 24-hour, year round orientation and adjustment center for blind Iowans and has attendant security and maintenance needs, especially since it functions as a residence for orientation center students. The Department has taken its stewardship over the building very seriously. In fact, the building already met the energy conservation and energy management requirements of executive order 41 before Governor Vilsack issued the order. The maintenance staff comprises one supervisor and eight staff for building operations, repairs, construction, security, and cleaning. Staffing has been reorganized and downsized from 21 employees in 1970. 24/7 staff coverage is required for health and life safety issues related to operating a residential adult rehabilitation center.

Maintenance staff set up certified CPR/AED/First Aid/Evacuation Chair training for more than 50% of Department staff. Life safety is taken very seriously.

Cleaning and security staff has maintained a clean, positive image for the public, has protected the State's investment and has reduced administrative liability issues.

However, these routine maintenance and security requirements now cost nearly \$ 800,000 per year and require the Department for the Blind to use for its infrastructure needs approximately \$ 170,000 of the general fund operating appropriation and the federal formula grant intended for the vocational rehabilitation and independent living needs of blind Iowans.

The building also houses a library for the blind and physically handicapped containing what is perhaps the largest Braille collection in the world. Library space requirements occupy a large portion of the building because of the Braille collection and other information storage media. Library operations entail \$ 1.8 million annually and this is also a cost shared by general fund appropriations and federal vocational rehabilitation funds, since improving literacy supports the job marketability of the Department's clients. The Iowa Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped is a lifeline for over 8,500 Iowans each year. These Iowans are our neighbors, our parents and grandparents, our school children, our friends. They live in every county, town and city in Iowa. Many go to school, hold jobs, and lead active lives in Iowa's families and communities. Still more are retired, living in their own homes, assisted living and nursing facilities. The one thing they have in common is that they want to read. They want to read for pleasure, for school, for work, to keep up with current events, to make informed voting, buying,

and health care decisions, and for the sheer pleasure of it. But they cannot read standard print. Most are blind or visually impaired. Some cannot hold a book or turn pages. Others are unable to interpret the printed text because of organically based reading disabilities. The Library provides a bridge between the printed text and those who cannot read it by circulating books, magazines, described videos in formats they can read--Braille, large print, recorded and electronic text. With the help of over 120 volunteers, the Library also transcribes items blind and visually impaired Iowans request for personal, educational, and vocational use. This includes textbooks, worksheets, supplemental readers, and all other printed materials Iowa's blind school children need to learn along with their sighted peers. It includes prescription inserts, product manuals, bank statements, and medical care brochures people need to manage their personal affairs. It includes employer training manuals, handbooks, and other material workers need for their jobs. And it includes a wide variety of miscellaneous items people just want to read.

In keeping with Iowa's rank as one of the most literate and educated states in the nation, the Library has the largest collection of books of its kind in the country. With its Braille and recording programs in full swing, we are able to meet the needs of all of our patrons, whose ages range from babies to centenarians, and whose needs and interests cover the entire spectrum. Time and time again, Iowans who use this Library express the value they place on the services they receive. In response to a recent survey, one family wrote: "I think my mother's life would be near intolerable were it not for Books On Tape. After being able to see for 88 ½ years, she has totally lost her sight and her lifelong love. Your programs allow her mental stimulation and relief from the black closet her life could have become. Thank you."

Since its establishment in 1960, the Library has been funded as part of the Iowa Department for the Blind. This has included heavy reliance on federal funding through the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). It is the only such Library in the country with RSA funding. All other states support their libraries for the blind with state appropriations. In fact, the Library does support the Vocational Rehabilitation programs at the Department. Because of the Library's unique program which brings books and magazines directly to our patrons' doors at no charge to eligible patrons, and because the books and magazines are recorded or Brailled so that they can read them, most of our patrons rely on the Library as their primary source of reading materials.

The Library is a uniquely Iowa resource, providing vital services and resources to Iowans statewide. To maintain these services and keep Iowans who cannot read standard print fully enfranchised, the Library needs more state support.

In addition, by early in calendar 2008 the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) is expected to implement digital audio technology as the framework of the future talking book system. Cassette books and machines will continue to be the backbone of the system for some time, but the Department will also begin to incur additional expense to address this change as well.

For the year ending September 30, 2006 we recovered \$ 842,787 from the Social Security Administration we used to address the difference between formula grant resources and costs. However, in most years we generate far less from Social Security and there is no reason to expect that the outstanding year we had in 2006 should be expected as a new baseline. This

source of revenue is not especially susceptible to accrual or good estimation in ways that commend it as a basis for annual operating budgets. Since 2001 Social Security recoveries have ranged from zero to this year's level and have averaged below \$ 300,000 per year.

The annual Title I reallocation process conducted by the U.S. Rehabilitation Services Administration among all VR agencies in the nation also yielded additional resources in each of the past two years. However, this cannot be an annual strategy either. Furthermore, this exercise is done by RSA late each year and in a very compressed period of a few weeks. We cannot base a budget process on this practice. There is no assurance we will be able to receive sufficient – or any – reallocated money until months have elapsed after the legislature adjourns.

Unless these issues of financing the infrastructure and other operations can be effectively resolved the Department for the Blind faces decisions by the end of FY 2007 that will considerably reduce the Department's ability to provide services to its clientele.